



Tip Sheet for Film/Video Artist Fellowship Applicants

Okay, first the bad news. There is no magic formula to developing a successful fellowship application. A lot depends on variables beyond your control, like who else applies and who the panelists will be for the review process. But there are things you can do in advance that may increase the competitiveness of your application.

This tip sheet is about strategies you can take to put together a better application. But to begin with we want you to keep in mind the following first principles:

- 1) Your work samples will be the most important component of your application.
- 2) Check your eligibility. Eligibility is described in the fellowship program overview, with additional information in the film/video guidelines. While not terribly stringent, there are a few restrictions so be sure you qualify before going to the trouble of putting together an application. If you have questions, call the program staff.
- 3) Read the guidelines and follow the instructions in AGO. The tip sheet is intended to supplement, not substitute for the category guidelines or application instructions.
- 4) Submit everything that's asked for, but only what is asked for. Unrequested material—work samples exceeding what's requested, press clippings, letters of recommendation, etc.—will not be considered.
- 5) Get your application in on time. The deadline is Monday, November 2, 2015 at 11:59 p.m. Complete work sample DVDs must be postmarked by the deadline.
- 6) Your work samples will be the most important component of your application. (Did we get that point across?)

Arts Grants Online (AGO)

Unfortunately, if you're looking for tips on how to navigate the AGO site, this is not where you'll find that information. There are step-by-step instructions on the site. Though we imagine you will find the site easier to use than you may anticipate, start early to give yourself extra time if you're new to the system.

What follows are some tidbits about how you might approach the different elements of the application.

Application Profile

This form is fairly straightforward. The system will not let you submit the application unless you have filled in all the required fields in this section. Otherwise, there's not too much strategy required here. A couple of reminders:

- Please provide complete and current contact information. This information goes into our database and your entry on our web site. If the information changes

after you apply, correct your profile and get in touch with us so that we can make the changes in our database.

- The system alphabetizes by the name you put in the Last Name field, so if you have a double last name (e.g., Smedley-Quackenbush), put it all in the Last Name text box.

Narrative

The meat of the application begins with the narrative. But before you plunge in, be sure to respond to the questions about discipline and genre, as they determine which panel will review your work.

There is also a question about collaborations. Though filmmaking is often a group venture, we're really interested only in partnerships in which there is more than one person with significant creative input and say-so in the result. As a general rule, the director is first among equals, hires the other talent she needs, and has final control of the product – hence, not a collaboration for our purposes. You will have an opportunity to list other key contributors in the work sample descriptions. If you do apply with one or more collaborators, it is highly recommended that you show work you have already done together for your work samples rather than depend on the panel to imagine how different bodies of work might be married together.

On the AGO site, you will find three text boxes in which you will answer the narrative questions. Each has a specific character limit with the overall total of 4,500 for all three. You should be able to cut and paste from a Word document into the boxes, but be aware that you're likely to lose your formatting in the transition. Also, different browsers count characters differently: Mozilla, for instance, counts two characters for spaces where Explorer counts only one. Which means that you can say only about 85% as much using Mozilla. This may not be an unmitigated evil, but if you're long-winded (or just have a lot of meaty points you're dying to make), you may want to choose a more generous browser. Overall, however, Mozilla is the recommended browser for its compatibility to the AGO system.

But, to the chase. A narrative is required to tell the panel how you would spend the award should you receive the grant, how the grant will assist in your artistic development, and why it's important that you receive the grant at this time. But it is secondary in importance to the work samples you will submit. If you find yourself agonizing over your narrative, you are probably spending too much time on it. Here are a few suggestions and reminders to help you craft an appropriate statement.

- Get to the point. You don't have unlimited space, so save your lyrical and elliptical expositions for another forum. A typed page (roughly the space you have) is plenty of room to respond fully to the questions.
- This is not a project grant. You do not need to submit a budget. While you can propose an artist project to undertake with the grant award, it is not required. That said, we have observed that most film/video artists have a project they're working on or want to work on—and that's perfectly okay. But the emphasis should be on how the project is a logical, or at least credible next step in your growth as an artist. The intent of the fellowship is to give artists doing strong work some resources to continue exploring and developing their work.

- What you should be able to describe in your narrative is where you are now with your work and where you would like to take it—the trajectory you see your work taking. Someone reading your narrative after having seen your work samples should say to herself, “That makes sense.”
- If your work involves unusual technical features, you can use the narrative to amplify the panelists’ understanding. The narrative can also be used to discuss the significance of your work, though caution is appropriate here. There’s a difference between saying that your work addresses certain themes and saying what it means or, heaven forbid, touting its quality. If you feel the urge, take a 20-minute walk and get a grip on yourself.
- You’re applying for a film/video artist fellowship not a writers fellowship, so you don’t have to worry about literary style points. Nonetheless, a clear, clean, focused narrative helps demonstrate your knowledge of your work and where you would like to take it. Here are a few general reminders:
 - Talk about your work, not about yourself. These grants are intended to help you develop your work, not to help you address emotional, financial, or existential issues in your life.
 - Be descriptive, not interpretive. Avoid telling the reader what your work means (“The sun is a symbol for salvation, while the flowers suggest rebirth...”) or how well it conveys your message (“The final scene deftly ties the threads of the plot together...”).
 - Use active voice as a general rule (“I plan to experiment with Super 8 in the coming year” or “The film works on several levels at once”). Passive voice typically slows the reader down and often creates an unnecessary ambiguity or ungainliness in the syntax (“The work is envisioned as a film noir parody” or “Of especial note is the use of the color in the penultimate scene...”).
 - Panelists are chosen from different areas of the film and video field, but you can assume they will all be conversant with general concepts and terms and have a basic familiarity with a variety of forms and approaches. If you are discussing specific processes or techniques in your area of specialty, however, it may require some additional explanation. Avoid gratuitous artspeak or academic jargon, unless you’re sure the panel will be receptive and you’re confident about your ability to use it correctly. There’s little to be gained by pretentiousness.
 - The best gauge of your success with your narrative is to have a non-film friend read it. If he doesn’t understand it, that’s probably a good sign you’re not being clear.

Finally, call the program officer if you have questions about the application. We are willing to review drafts of narratives if we receive them at least two weeks before the deadline.

Résumé

Résumés are required but are only reviewed as supporting material to the work samples and narrative. They can provide information to panelists about timing and background that may be relevant during the final decision-making process. Generally, résumés should be:

- Artist résumés. That is, they should focus on your activities as an artist, including broadcast and screening history, festival selections, residencies, workshops taught or taken, lectures, panels, education, employment, awards, etc.
- Abbreviated. You can submit the 30-page version of your résumé, but it may not always make the impression you imagine it will, either on the panel or on the program assistant who will have to print it out and copy it. A good length to aim for is three to five pages.

Be sure to include a list of completed films and/or videos on your résumé. To be eligible, you must have completed at least one film or video as the primary maker. Typically, this means you were the director, though in some instances other team members may fit the definition more accurately. We want our applicants to be the individuals with creative control of the work they have submitted (or shown on their résumé). See work sample description below for more discussion.

Work Samples

You will submit your 10-minute sample in MP4 format as an upload to AGO, or provide a Web link to a 10-minute sample using the Web Link Collection form. Space permitting, you may also submit the optional full work sample in either of these formats, or you can submit it on DVD (four copies). Generally speaking, it's a good idea to submit a full work sample, if you have one from the past five years you're proud of.

While all components of the application are required, none is more important than the work samples in the evaluation process. Panelists are instructed to make their recommendations using artistic merit as their guiding criterion, so it is essential that applicants choose strong work that is well-presented by the work samples. Here are a few general principles to keep in mind as you put together your work sample package:

There are five (more or less) components to artistic merit: content, form, technical quality, aesthetics, and originality. Here's a brief summary of what we mean by these terms:

- Content: a meaningful and well-formed idea, theme(s), story, or concept
- Form: a structure that successfully develops the story and theme(s) and supports the underlying intent of the work
- Technical quality: given the original format, strong and consistent sound and image quality
- Aesthetics: creative use of visuals and sound in relation to the form and content of the work
- Originality: fresh ideas and approaches to form and content resulting in insightful, moving, and/or provocative work

Of these, technical quality is perhaps the most obvious when it's not right and also the most straightforward to address. Don't make it easy for the panel to dismiss your work because of a sloppy presentation. Use the work sample description to explain technical issues that are the result of the stage of production, the difference between the original and presentation formats, etc.

- Once you have good work samples, you need to choose which work samples to submit. For your ten-minute sample, you can submit a complete work, a segment of a longer work (excerpted as indicated above), or several complete works or segments of works. A few general recommendations are:
 - Submit a coherent body of work. You may be facile in narrative, documentary, and experimental forms and dabble in film-based performances as well, but it's generally not to your advantage to show the panel all you can do. Making a statement about a single body of work is difficult enough in ten minutes; switching forms begs comparisons, so it's usually better to choose one and make as strong a statement as you can with it.
 - Submit work completed in the last five years. Fellowship grants are not lifetime achievement awards. They are offered biennially and are intended to recognize artists whose recent work is exemplary. Can artists submit older work? They can, but panelists will be instructed to give work completed in last five years a clear preference.
 - Submit independent work. Commercial, educational, and industrial work all tend to fall short on the originality measure, as they are often works for hire. Do not submit trailers or promotional shorts, even of independent work. Panelists want to see the real thing, not its glossy distillation.
 - Do not submit work completed as a student in an academic program. The conditions and nature of academic programs are fundamentally different than those of working artists. We would like for Arts Council funds to support artists who are creating strong work as independent professionals.
- Be careful about submitting works-in-progress. By their very nature, they are not a finished product and thus are, in some ways, unresolved artistically. Understand that if you use a work-in-progress as your primary work sample, it will be evaluated against finished work from other applicants. See below for a possible approach to using a work-in-progress in your application.
- Think about sequencing if you submit samples from multiple works. In some ways, it's appealing to show the panel how your work has evolved from the first work you show to the last, but you have to be sure the early ones will hold their interest long enough for them to appreciate the full length of your journey. First impressions matter, especially in time-based work. Panelists typically want to be generous and view all works represented on the sample—but they are not obliged to. It's often a good idea to make a strong statement at the start to generate as much momentum as you can for your application.

- Remember that you can submit a complete work. This can either be the full work from which your ten-minute sample was taken or a different work. One strategy is to use finished work in the ten-minute sample and a complete work-in-progress for the full work, allowing the panel to see what you're capable of and where your next project is taking you. While the second sample can reinforce a strong application, it's not required viewing. Panelists will only look at your full work sample if they were impressed enough with the first.

Work Sample Descriptions

Work sample descriptions will also be submitted online. While you should identify uploaded work in Video bank, you should use the forms provided online to describe your work more fully. These will be uploaded to the Written Documents bank and selected for the application from there.

Work sample descriptions are intended to identify several basic features of your work:

- Title and running time
- Date of completion and shooting location, as appropriate. For the date, the year is sufficient—for works in progress, indicate when significant work was last done on the project)
- Original format (8mm, Super 8mm, 16mm, 35mm, Beta, etc.)
- List and roles of principals. This is essential because to win a fellowship you must demonstrate that you were in substantial control of the creative decision-making for the films you submitted. Typically, this means you were the director, though in some cases other roles may be central. Applicants whose only role was screenwriter should apply in November 2016.
- Brief description. Outline succinctly the plot and structure of the film and indicate any significant technical issues occasioned by the stage of production, choice of formats, use of experimental techniques, etc.

What we really don't want to see in the work sample descriptions are:

- A laborious retelling of the plot
- What the work is supposed to mean or how the viewer should think or feel about it. Panelists are pretty savvy; if you try to tell them what it means or spin their response, you may not get the reaction you desire.
- Where the work has been screened or any awards it has won. This is résumé material.
- Your personal philosophy of life. To the degree it's relevant to your work—and many times, it's not—the appropriate place for such ruminations are in the narrative.

This is probably more than you would ever want or need to know about applying for a film/video artist fellowship grant. However, if you still have questions, do not hesitate to call or e-mail me at the Arts Council. You can reach me at jeff.pettus@ncdcr.gov, 919-807-6513.

Best of luck with your application.